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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANJUL 000396

SIPDIS

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DEPT. FOR AF/FO, AF/W, AF/RSA, AND VCI/FO; PRETORIA PLS  
PASS TO VCI PDAS FORD; DAKAR PLS PASS TO DAO, ODC, AND RAO

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EAIR, GA, AU

SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: SCENE-SETTER FOR VCI PDAS FORD'S AND  
AF DAS THOMAS-GREENFIELD'S VISITS

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

#### SUMMARY

1. (C) VCI PDAS Ford and AF DAS Thomas-Greenfield will visit The Gambia against the backdrop of the AU Summit -- for which the GOTG is feverishly preparing -- but also against the backdrop of markedly negative human rights trend in this country, as highlighted by abuses following the coup plot thwarted March 21. The GOTG has shown little regard for detainees held in connection with the failed plot, while also cracking down on private media institutions. The negative repercussions of the GOTG's backsliding on human rights were evident in the June 16 suspension of The Gambia's eligibility for the MCA program. Holding credible Presidential and National Assembly elections in 2006-7 will be crucial in GOTG efforts to reverse the negative human rights trend, which underscores rough-hewn President Jammeh's autocratic impulses.

2. (C) In the absence of MCA assistance, our Peace Corps program remains the centerpiece of USG development aid to The Gambia; annual bilateral assistance totals \$1.5 million to \$2 million, and half of this amount goes to run the Peace Corps program. The U.S. private sector's contribution to The Gambia's development in terms of investment remains modest, but is growing, and the inauguration of direct flights between Baltimore and Banjul by North American Airlines will promote commercial and other links. Other key items in our bilateral agenda include pursuing the Global War on Terrorism and promoting regional peace and stability, but President Jammeh's erratic, autocratic behavior -- and his clumsy handling of relations with a far more powerful neighbor, Senegal -- complicates efforts to advance our agenda here.

END SUMMARY.

#### OVERVIEW: AU SUMMIT

3.(C) VCI PDAS Christopher Ford and AF DAS Linda Thomas-Greenfield, scheduled to visit The Gambia next week, will be the most senior State Department officials to travel here since the June 2003 visit by then-AF DAS Amb. Bridgewater. Their visits will occur during the GOTG-hosted African Union Summit and preparatory meetings June 25-July 2, for which the GOTG is at present feverishly finalizing

arrangements. The AU Summit will be the largest international gathering ever hosted by the Gambians, and the tiny, severely resource-strapped GOTG is all-consumed with Summit preparations. It remains unclear just how many African heads of state will be on hand, although GOTG and other sources estimate that perhaps half of the 53 leaders will personally attend. Gambian President Yahya Jammeh's priority for the Summit is clear -- using it to cast himself as a respected, established African leader.

#### NEGATIVE HUMAN RIGHTS TREND

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14. (C) But PDAS Ford's and DAS Thomas-Greenfield's visits will also occur against a backdrop detracting from Jammeh's image-building efforts: marked deterioration in the GOTG's record on human rights and respect for democratic norms. The negative human rights trend has been most evident since November 2005, when authorities, likely acting at the President's direct instruction, detained three opposition politicians on trumped-up charges of sedition and unlawful possession of official documents. The GOTG subsequently released the trio on bail, following a month's detention, and later dropped the charges altogether, but, since the coup attempt foiled March 21, the deterioration in the country's human rights situation has only intensified.

#### THE FOILED COUP PLOT

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15. (C) In response to the failed overthrow attempt, a vengeful Jammeh publicly vowed that those implicated would be treated "without mercy" so as to deter future would-be plotters. In the ensuing months, authorities have detained over 50 persons -- including military officers, civilian officials, parliamentarians, and private citizens -- suspected of having any connection with the plot. So far, 15 detainees have been charged and are currently on trial,

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around 28 have been cleared of involvement in the plot and released without charge, and five or so remain in custody, but have yet to be charged. A GOTG statement claimed that five detainees, including former National Intelligence Agency head Daba Marena, escaped from custody in late March, but authorities have said nothing since about efforts to recapture them, amidst persistent rumors that they were secretly executed.

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16. (C) Our sense is that authorities have shown little regard for detainees' rights; we have picked up credible reports of torture. (A senior official, detained but later released, claimed to us that both he and his children were beaten by security officials determined to obtain incriminating information.) We believe that all detainees, including those released and cleared of suspicion, were held without charge beyond the maximum 72-hour period stipulated by law. Jammeh has stated that the accused will receive a fair trial, but it is hard to imagine those tortured being allowed to testify to the abuse. As for those detainees who have yet to be charged, among them is Mariam Denton, lawyer of prominent defendant and dual U.S.-Gambian national Tamsir Jasseh. A reliable source tells us that authorities have no evidence of Denton's involvement in the failed plot, but are keeping her in custody because of her refusal so far to divulge information that Jasseh may have shared with her about the plot.

#### CRACKDOWN ON THE MEDIA

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17. (C) The country's private media institutions have also figured prominently in the negative human rights trend. In October 2005, authorities closed the Sengalese-run radio

station, SUD FM, citing broadcasts that could undermine Gambian/Senegalese relations. In late March, in the aftermath of the foiled coup plot, authorities closed a journal, the "Independent," and detained its General Manager and Chief Editor -- both later released -- as well as a journalist, who has been charged with "printing false information" and is currently on trial. The GOTG has given no explanation for the continued closure of the "Independent," but our sources believe that, because of the paper's well-known anti-government outlook, the GOTG is unwilling to permit it to resume publication, lest its anti-Jammeh pieces tarnish his image prior to the AU Summit. Most recently, the manager of the foreign-based online "Freedom Newspaper," also known for its anti-Jammeh views, claimed that pro-GOTG hackers had been responsible for the disruption of his website and public disclosure of the names of subscribers; authorities reacted by calling in locally resident subscribers for questioning. Meanwhile, the December 2004 murder of prominent journalist Deyda Hydara, associated with the independent journal, "The Point," remains unsolved, amidst ongoing allegations of GOTG involvement.

#### FALLOUT ON BILATERAL TIES: SUSPENSION OF MCA ELIGIBILITY

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¶8. (C) The top U.S. objective in The Gambia is promoting respect for human rights and democratization, and the GOTG's backsliding in this area is at present overshadowing all other aspects of our bilateral relationship. Indicative of the fallout, on June 16 the Millenium Challenge Corporation's (MCC) Board of Directors voted to suspend The Gambia's eligibility for the Millenium Challenge Account (MCA) program. The MCC's decision was based, inter alia, on the GOTG's declining performance on MCA eligibility criteria in the "ruling justly" category; slippage in performance on various criteria in the "promoting economic freedom" category was also cited. With the GOTG currently all-consumed with AU Summit preparations, its reaction to the suspension has so far been muted; Foreign Minister Lamin Kaba Bajo indicated to the Ambassador the GOTG's desire to work closely with us on behalf of reinstatement, but it is hard to imagine the GOTG achieving sufficient improvement on relevant eligibility criteria within the minimum six-month "waiting period" for submission of a successful reinstatement request.

#### THE 2006-7 ELECTIONS

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¶9. (C) Holding credible Presidential and National Assembly elections, scheduled for September 2006 and January 2007, respectively, will be crucial in any GOTG effort to reverse

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the current negative trend in the human rights and political arenas. Prospects for good elections, though, are uncertain. To be sure, opposition parties have been allowed in recent months to conduct public gatherings and other activities to build popular support. A recent by-election for a National Assembly seat featured active campaigning by opposition as well as ruling party candidates, and the opposition accepted the ruling party's victory as legitimate. Opposition leaders have assured us that they will participate in the Presidential and National Assembly contests, asserting their belief that they will have an adequate opportunity to compete for votes. (NOTE: The 2002 National Assembly contest, although judged credible by the international community, nonetheless featured a boycott by the country's leading opposition party, the United Democratic Party, UDP. UDP leaders have repeatedly told us that they will refrain from a boycott in the upcoming contests. END NOTE)

¶10. (C) At the same time, the GOTG's backsliding on human rights in past months has pointed up President Jammeh's autocratic impulses. While opposition party leaders have not been targetted in the aftermath of the failed coup plot, Jammeh's public statements deriding the opposition are not

encouraging. In February, Nigerian President Obasanjo's mediation brought about improved dialog between Jammeh and his ruling APRC party, on the one hand, and the opposition parties, on the other; in Obasanjo's presence, the two sides signed a MOU setting forth a "code of good conduct" for the elections. The extent to which Jammeh and his APRC respect the MOU in the run-up to the elections will likely serve as a good indicator regarding the credibility of the electoral process. Meanwhile, our sources express hope that Obasanjo, perhaps joined by other African leaders, will use the AU Summit to impress on Jammeh the imperative of reining in his autocratic tendencies and permitting credible elections. We will also continue to stress to the GOTG the crucial importance of good elections for the country's democratic evolution.

#### THE GAMBIA'S DEVELOPMENT AND U.S.SUPPORT

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¶11. (SBU) The Gambia's now-suspended MCA eligibility held out the prospect of a substantial expansion of U.S. assistance for the country's efforts at development and poverty alleviation. Among the world's poorest countries, with per capita income less than \$400, The Gambia relies heavily on foreign donor assistance. In the absence of MCA assistance, our Peace Corps program remains the centerpiece of our development aid. Overall bilateral U.S. aid to The Gambia currently runs at \$1.5 million to \$2 million annually, and about half of this amount represents the cost of the Peace Corps program. A noteworthy development is the growing involvement in The Gambia of the U.S. Trade and Development Agency (USTDA), which is currently supporting two feasibility studies for investment projects here.

¶12. (SBU) The U.S. private sector's contribution to The Gambia's development in terms of investment remains modest; current investments total an estimated several million dollars. At the same time, American firms are showing increasing interest in The Gambian market, and the recent inauguration of a weekly direct flight between Baltimore and Banjul by North American Airlines will facilitate the strengthening of commercial and other links. True, the current volume of bilateral trade is minimal, and The Gambia has yet to take much advantage of its AGOA eligibility, with AGOA-qualified exports to the U.S. less than \$100,000 annually. The Gambia's AGOA-related textile visa is expected to be finalized soon, but the country's prospects for significant textile exports to the U.S. are limited.

#### OTHER U.S. INTERESTS

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¶13. (C) Other noteworthy bilateral interests include the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) and regional peace and stability. Regarding the GWOT, in recent years, Jammeh and his government have proven to be useful partners, providing concrete support for several joint counterterrorism operations. The GOTG's efforts on behalf of regional peace and stability are manifested in its participation in peacekeeping operations, most recently the African Union Mission in Darfur, where the Gambian contingent includes a company of troops, around 100 police officers, and various

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military observers. Also noteworthy is the generally pro-U.S. feeling in this moderate Muslim country, making it fertile ground for our public diplomacy efforts.

#### CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

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¶14. (C) Following his re-election in 2001, Jammeh undertook various initiatives to improve ties with the U.S., e.g., concluding an Article 98 Agreement, sharply reducing links with a key patron, Libya, adopting a more moderate foreign policy generally, and improving the GOTG's human rights

record. The U.S., in turn, responded with such gestures as lifting the "508 Sanctions" imposed following his 1994 coup and granting AGOA eligibility; the culmination was the granting of MCA eligibility. Past months, however, have served to reaffirm the rough-hewn Gambian leader's penchant for erratic, autocratic behavior and called into question his reliability and effectiveness as a partner. His clumsy handling of ties with his far more powerful neighbor, Senegal (e.g., the two countries' August/October 2005 dispute over transport and border issues, provoked by the GOTG, Jammeh's poor management of bilateral strains resulting from the failed coup plot) also raises questions as to The Gambia's status as a force for stability in West Africa. In sum, Jammeh's pattern of behavior in recent months requires that we keep up the pressure for a reversal of the negative trends that led to the suspension of MCA eligibility while working to maintain cooperation on other key U.S. interests such as the GWOT.

STAFFORD